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CIA Study Praises Soviet Arms Process

Good old American know-how and free enterprise are what made the United States the arsenal of democracy, and will ensure that we triumph over the hopelessly inefficient Soviet system of military research and development. American industrial management needs no lessons from a bunch of commie bureaucrats. Right?

Wrong, declares a CIA specialist in a study intended for official eyes only. The U.S. weapons-procurement system, the study reports, is "in deep trouble." It takes too long, costs too much and "taxes away too much of the time and energies of the limited [personnel]."

The study's heretical conclusions are that U.S. policy-makers would be well advised to borrow a few leaves from the Soviet book on weapons development. In fact, the report congratulates the Reagan administration for adopting some Soviet ideas. A copy has been obtained by our associate Indy Badhwar.

"One of the most concerted efforts ever attempted to repair the ailing U.S. system . . . focused on 32 separate initiatives," the CIA report states, adding: "A number of [these] proposed actions coincided with Soviet practice. One official who was involved in formulating the initiatives confirmed that some were drafted with Soviet practices in mind."

But the study's author, operating with a grant under an "exceptional intelligence analyst program," added this warning: "Without structural changes to the U.S. system, these or any actions are said to be difficult to implement."

The study, embarrassing as it may be to the entrenched Pentagon weapons-development establishment, confirms the general criticism we've been offering for years: The system that worked such miracles in World War II has degenerated into a costly and complicated process that makes multibillion-dollar boondoggles inevitable. Only a top-to-bottom shakeup can restore efficiency and cost-effectiveness to the Pentagon's cumbersome weapons programs, which eat up a staggering portion of the federal budget each year.

The CIA analyst's most telling criticism may be in the anecdote he relates about an expert on arms production who was asked how the U.S. effort in World War II succeeded so splendidly "with so few people [doing] so much with so little." The expert replied: "Because there were so few people."

Among the myriad deficiencies in the U.S. system today, the report says, is the growing length of time it takes to acquire new weapons. For example, the first submerged ballistic missile, the Polaris A1, was developed in less than five years; the A5 took more than six years, the Poseidon C3 took nine years and the Trident C4 11 years.

"The increasing lead time," the CIA analyst notes, "results in greater costs and, in a fast-changing technological arms competition, tends to render systems almost obsolete by the time they are operational."

The report also says the Pentagon's cost overruns are far greater than those of other countries: between 50 and 80 percent, compared with cost overruns in France, Sweden and Great Britain of between 10 and 30 percent.